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Monks and Masons at the Monastery of St. Moses the Abyssinian, Syria.

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The Abrahamic faiths, being Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have a long tradition of seeking God in the desert, and of prophets returning from the desert with the latest word from God. This should be understandable to anyone but the most spiritually undeveloped individuals if they spend any time in the desert. It is so devoid of anything to distract you that it is natural for your mind to turn to thoughts of The Eternal. I can speak from personal experience to say that the sunstroke and fluid deprivation aid this considerably! Hence it is understandable that in the early Byzantine period, say in the 5th century CE, a number of Christian monasteries were founded in the desert for their residents to retreat from mundane existence and take up a life of reflection where they would not be distracted. One of these is in the mountains of the Syrian desert, 90 km north of Damascus, and is named after St. Moses the Abyssinian. Unusually, the monastery survived the uncertainties around the incorporation of Syria into the Islamic world in 634-635 CE, and also the Crusades from 1098 and through the 12th-13th centuries, until it was finally abandoned in the 19th century. That this Christian community flourished in Muslim Syria while to the west Crusaders were massacring Muslims, native Christians, and especially Jews, is an interesting aspect of this site. A community was re-established at the site in the 1980s, and it is now a functioning monastery once more, with a mandate of interfaith dialogue and greening of the desert.

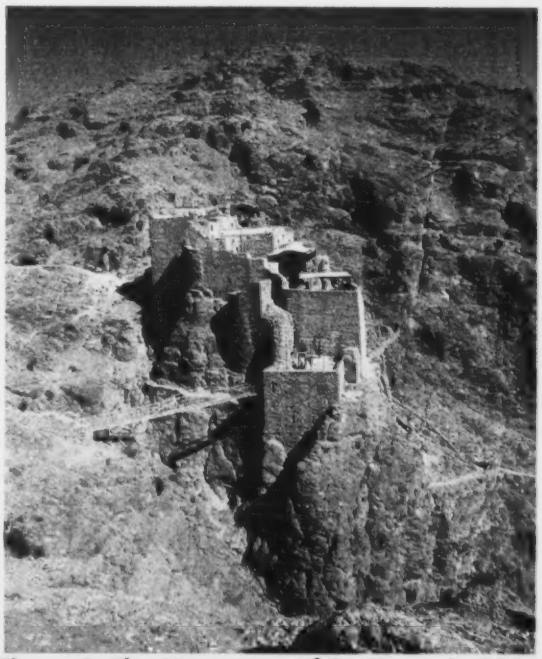

Figure 1: The Monastery of St. Moses in 2004 (photo by Robert Mason).

The ROM Project

What first drew me to the site was an interesting group of 14th century glazed pottery [see next ANL issue], which had been found during restoration at the site. The glazed ceramics of the mediaeval Middle East are a particular study of mine (Mason 2004). I had first seen the examples at St. Moses in 2002 while excavating another site. So in 2004 I went back to study the pottery properly, and while I was there the superior of the monastery asked if I would undertake a full archaeological study of the region, and also install a gallery in the monastery museum. I agreed, and a new ROM project was initiated.

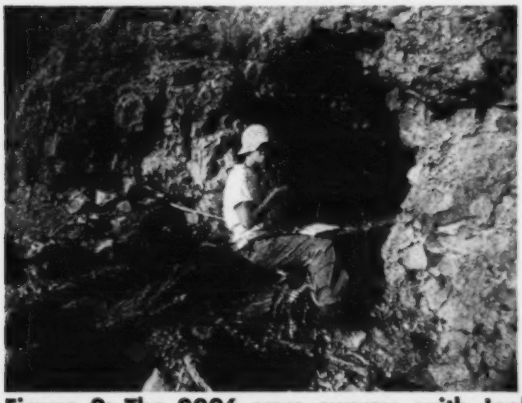

Figure 2: The 2006 cave survey, with Joelle Chartrand. This is one of the caves occupied by the monks (photo by Robert Mason).

The Survey

The first part of the project was to survey the area around the monastery. St. Moses is what is known as a *laura*, which is actually a community of hermitages with a central church and monastery where the monks come together as a community only on a Sunday, to pray and pick up any supplies they may need. At St. Moses the monks would have lived in small caves spread along the dry river valley or *wadi* that leads into the mountains from the main monastery buildings. These are all about the same size, roughly 2 metres in each direction, and appear to have been worked out of the rock by the monks. Just over 30 caves have been located in the survey, together with other structures (buildings, cisterns, etc).

The Architecture

The 2007 season was spent in an intense study of the architecture of the main buildings. Reading stonework is possibly something towards which I have a natural bent (my name *is* Mason, after all). In this it is necessary to look at the stones in the masonry, see how they are shaped and worked, and how they are laid in courses, and essentially dismantle the stonework in your head, to work out the sequence of construction.

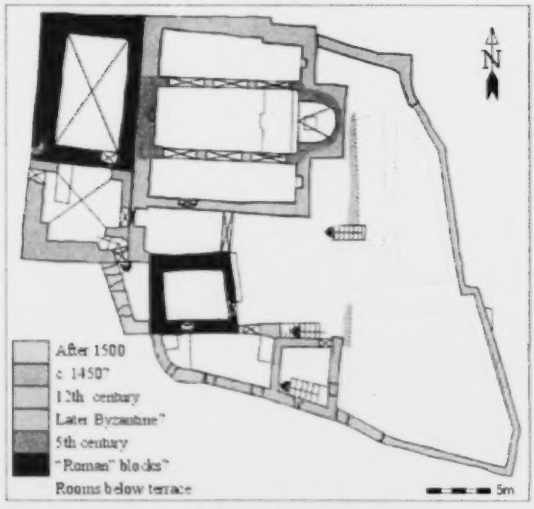

Figure 3: Plan of the main buildings.

The first phase of occupation at the site is probably Roman **(Figs. 3 & 4)**, and is represented by very large blocks typically about 50-60 cm high, about 80 cm wide, and 50 cm thick. There are two structures with this stonework. The working hypothesis is that the southern one is actually a Roman watchtower, built to watch the Damascus to Palmyra road, essentially a stretch of the Silk Road, which is

visible in the desert plain below the monastery. and would be the most likely invasion route from the east. The northerly structure is thought to be the foundation of the monastery, possibly built in the 4th century, after the destruction of the southern structure, perhaps because of an earthquake.

The church itself is constructed in a number of phases. The core of the church is made of re-used Roman blocks and other stones, in a quality of work that is probably indicative of monks rather than masons. This early church is of a type that is well known in monasteries, and can be dated to the late 4th or 5th century. The next phase was obviously executed by professional masons, with stones well cut and dressed on all sides, and laid in standard courses. This phase created a church of the basilical plan typical of the 6th century. Similar stonework was used to rebuild the watchtower.

Further construction occurred during the Byzantine and the early Islamic period, but the next major phase of building was due to a disaster. In various parts of the monastery buildings large cracks can be seen created by the entire building being moved horizontally in two directions at once, evidence of geological faulting. Parts of the buildings had collapsed and been replaced by very rough stonework of rubble in disordered courses, with wood beams incorporated into the wall. This type of masonry represents repairs following an earthquake. A number of studies have been made on the historical accounts of earthquakes in the region of Syria, a moderately unstable area due to the Dead Sea Rift Zone which runs along the west of the region. This fault was particularly active during the 12th century, with a series of devastating shocks. A consequence of the necessary reconstruction was the creation of the most famous mural paintings in the Levant, dated by inscription to 1208 **(Figs. 5 & 6)**, as it is now evident that the plaster and paint was really just to cover the bad earthquake repairs!

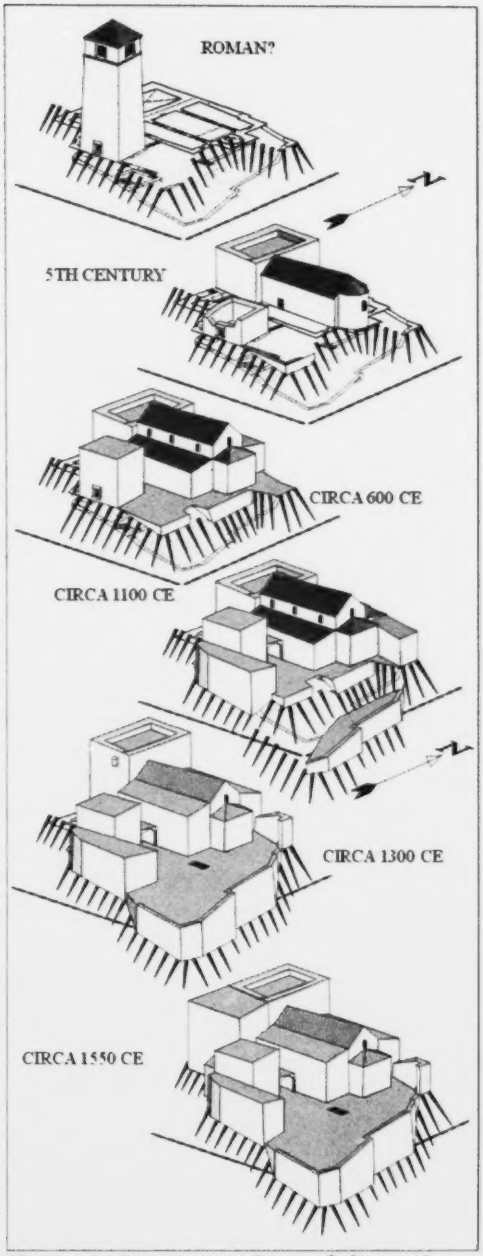

Figure 4: Reconstructions of the main buildings.

Apart from reconstruction to deal with earthquake damage, the terrace was built up in this period. The tower to the west of the church was later increased by a storey with stonework typical of defensive architecture of the 13th century. Further phases of construction are attested in later centuries, some with inscriptions dating to the 15th century **(Fig. 4)**.

Figure 5: John the Baptist, from the 1208 CE mural paintings (photo by Robert Mason).

The Future

Excavation is our main plan, including right under the altar, the likely spot for the crypt. If we find the crypt, it will be an exciting finding, with a store of the most precious relics of the monastery. We will also survey the uplands around the monastery, and down towards the Silk Road. So the ROM's sojourn in the desert is far from over! In fact, I hope to start taking out colleagues from the ROM Department Natural Sciences to study the biodiversity of the region. But as they say in the Middle East, it is as God wills!

Acknowledgements

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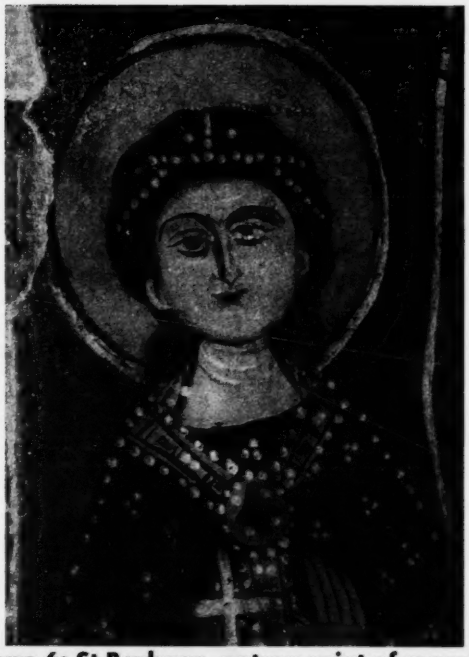

Figure 6: St Barbara, patron saint of masons (photo by Robert Mason).

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